CAST OUT

Poems of Anger and Angst





Basudev Sunani

Translated by

JPDas

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RUPANTAR

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Translator's Note

Is there dalit poetry in Oriya? Is a question I have often been asked, but never had a sure answer to. Till I came across Basudev Sunani's poems. In Basudev I discovered a poet who represents all that is powerful, significant and poetic in the genre known as dalit poetry.

Orissa never had the type of socio-cultural changes and awareness brought about by the efforts of reformers like Mahatma Phule and Ambedkar. After independence, in Maharashtra and elsewhere, when dalits found that whatever was given to them by law was being denied to them in practice they reacted with hatred and anger. The younger generation of dalits chose literature as a weapon to fight class discrimination and social injustice and wrote poetry of fire and fury, making liberal use of profanities.

The dalit literary movement, born out of suffering and anger, was influenced by Marxist thought, and Black writing in the USA and sought to prove that untouchables were no longer mute as they used to be; they had found a voice. Poetry had become their chosen medium. Impatient, angry and articulate young writers had taken centre stage in dalit discourse. Standing by themselves in a fragmented society where the dalit was treated as a stranger they wrote with burning rage and brutal frankness.

Dalit writing has yet to become a major literary movement in Oriya, but poets like Basudev have broken the mould and there are signs of others following the lead. Coming from a

village in the backward district of Kalahandi, Basudev has refused to associate with the typical provincial, regional and pastoral literature. Though the village and its life figure prominently in his writings and there is a sprinkling of rural dialects and words, they are viewed with extreme passions of indignation, affliction, protest and refusal. Not seeking emotional sympathy or charity from others and refusing to wallow in self-pity the poems take a stand against social injustice and exploitation. The poems are brutal and direct; there is no mincing of words, no effort to gloss over the so-called unpleasant, offensive or repulsive.

Basudev writes as if he is not concerned with poetry; his subject is the ignominy of the dalit. And the poetry is in the ignominy.

I have liked reading Basudev Sunani and have enjoyed translating these poems. I am grateful to the poet for his cooperation. I am thankful to my friend Paul St-Pierre who went through the translation and made valuable suggestions.

Cast Out
Poems of Anger and Angst

Prayer

Come,
Let's take off our clothes.

Let's take off Mahapatra's coat
from god Brahma's body;
let's take off Mohanty's suit
from Vishnu's waist.

Let's strip off Tandy's dhoti
from Ekalavya's body,
and Satnami's langot
from Shambuk's bottom.

Let us all line up,
naked, in front of God,
stripped of our ego.
We must muster our courage
for it's not easy to be naked.

It is a hundred times
still more difficult
to strip off our surnames
from our names.

When we're able to do that
we may stand before God
in our nakedness
and pray to him:
Oh, God,
we offer you here,

in one single bowl,
all our surnames-
Mohapatra, Mohanty,
Tandy and Satnami.
Can you, in all fairness,
return these to us,
each his own surname,
by simply looking at our faces,
listening to our voices
and sampling our blood ?

Then we will be grateful
for your godliness
and respect your
power of cognition.

Can you do that, God-
pick from the bowl
our respective surnames
and return them
each to his own ?



Coaching Centre

Oh learned men!
You surely know
that impurities of touch
completely dissolve
when a high caste man
takes a dip in water
and changes his clothes.

But look at the untouchable hordes!
Howsoever much
they rub themselves
with soap and water
and splash and dip
and scrub and polish,
they cannot shake off 'untouchability'
which clings to their bodies.

That is how and why
they have remained untouchables
over the millennia.
No-one has been able to decide
if untouchability
is a colour or a touch,
a feeling or an ideal;
whether it resides
in the one who touches,
or in the one who is touched.

A learned high caste man
could start a coaching centre
and make good money
if he could simply teach untouchables
how to shake off untouchability
with a single dip in water
and a change of clothes.



Seek Him Out

You must seek out
that man who hides
under the cold ash
like a burning ember;
who lies in wait
in the crevices of old stones
like a poisonous lizard;
who marks his time
like a silent bullet
in the barrel of a gun;
who pretends to be asleep
like an inert word
in a bowlful of sounds.

He might come out at any moment -
head shaven , body bare,
caste mark on his forehead.
He might come out
showing his shifty visage
wearing saffron
and ranting *slokas*.
He might come out
in fine white dhoti
counting *tulsi* beads
chewing holy *bel* leaves
and in a soft whisper
plant a bomb of holy words.

A bomb which proclaims
to you all, loud and clear:
Never plant the sacred tulsi
for you will incur the wrath
of the goddess
who dwells in that plant.
Never grow coconut on your land;
you'll go to hell if you do,
for it is the fruit of gods.
Never utter the alphabet
even in your sleep
for the letters form a mantra,
and your tongue will fall off.

Never cross a temple portal.
If this enrages the gods,
they will curse your family
to eternal damnation.

It is not easy to recognize
these illusionists
with their incendiary words
for they have learnt
the art of hiding
over thousands of years,
and have enjoyed themselves
keeping the public in fear.

My dear fellow!
Unless you search him out,
you are doomed to live
in perpetual discord
like all your ancestors.



Nectar-Seekers

Some mad men
lamp in hand
are busy looking for nectar
in the lanes and bylanes
in broad daylight.

What does nectar look like?
Is it ash grey
like the opium box
of the police constable
who takes bribes
in red light areas?
Or, is it blazing red
like the cheap lipstick
on the limp lips of the woman
selling bootleg liquor
in her tumbledown hut?

Where do you get nectar?
From the dark-skinned woman
squatting before her meagre ware
of parched grams
in the dim light
of the kerosene lamp
in front of the cinema hall?

Or at the butcher's,
where the meat man
has sold off all the meat

and now chops and carves
leftover hooves, tails and intestines
and offers them dirt cheap?

How does nectar taste?
Like the overnight water
in the stale half-bowl
of humble *gurji* cereal
spiced with salt and chillies?

Or like the wild berries
secretly tucked in the sari end
of the tribal girl
working the molten pitch
on the road construction crew ?

Can you show me the man here
who has tasted nectar?
I'll pull him by the hair,
give him a slap and tell him:
You fool!
You are the one who calls them
untouchables—
the men who plough your fields,
who tend your cattle,
who clean your latrines.
You spit in their faces
and can't stand their presence.

You are the ones
who cannot empathize

with your fellow men.
Shame on you
that you should be looking for nectar
for your salvation.
Did your father,
or your forefathers
ever see, recognize, know
what nectar looks and tastes like?
How the hell would you?



Smell of Untouchability

It is just as well
that I got to know
your blindness
from the very start.

Simply because my feet
touched the ground
you are seeking to purify it,
sprinkling holy cowdung water.

Had I requested
your house on rent
you would have been enraged
and driven me out
like a pariah dog.

Perhaps you do not know
that the land your house stands on
is surrounded by air
suffused with my dirty breath.
The bricks of your house
have been made from clay
from the river bed
where my humble hut stands,
moulded by the supple hands
of men whom you have discarded,
calling them untouchable.

Now that you have moved
into your beautiful house
you preach that untouchables
are not human beings,
that they are worse than animals,
to be despised.

Dear sir,
if you have the moral courage,
strip open the walls
and look at the rubble
and see,
how each atom of brick and sand
bears the sweet smell
of untouchabiity.



Go to the Village End

Go!
Go to the outskirts
of the village
and build your hovel there.
Have a separate ghat.
On our roads,
walk on the sides.

Your dwelling should be modest
and look like a cowshed,
so that from a distance
people will know
it is untouchable land.

Your women will clean our cowdung.
You will be our bonded slaves.
Your children will tend our goats.
It is we who will give you sustenance.

Be there outside our houses
for us to call you
to clean up our filth.

Go, you untouchables
to the village end
and build your huts there.
Be at our beck and call;
we have many uses for you.



Cursed City

No one cares to look
at the history being written
day to day
on the walls of huts
in the outskirts of the city.

No one bothers to understand
the pain of the lowly *chakunda* leaves
being cooked for food
but not coming to a boil
on the many helpless hearths.

In this cursed city,
shaped by the sweepress's broom,
wants grow into lifeless mounds
of sewage filth.
Sold off in liquor shops
humanity rolls by the roadside
mouthing obscenities.

Who do you look for here?
Men here are like
grotesque reptiles
from forbidden lands,
each one a heinous sin
hiding behind idols of gods.

Speak slow;
keep silent, they say.
But I must reveal
that in each house, in every street
there is a search for the progenitors
of untouchability;
and a trap is being laid
to catch the feral darkness.



Self-Respect

Shame!
Shame on my impotence,
my feeling of smallness.

Why do I regret my identity,
my social standing?

Manu isn't ashamed.
Manuvadis aren't ashamed
of following him
and practicing untouchability
to the letter
and perpetuating it.

If they have no remorse
about the social order,
why should I feel shame?

My untouchable brothers,
forgive me.
My hallowed tradition,
forgive me.
My gods and goddesses
and my forefathers in heaven,
forgive me.

I know that
I'll always be only yours;
even if I change my surname,

even if I conceal my caste.
Touchable, I am yours;
untouchable, I am yours.
Hated, I am yours;
loved, I am yours.

From now on,
the hatred I face everyday
will be my self-respect
and it will be so
for all time.



Contentment

I changed my religion,
not because I thought
I'd attain salvation
but only for a bit of consolation
when I'm in mental agony.

Even now
the God of my faith
lives in my native village.
He lives on my bed,
in my ancestor's abode-
maybe in a slightly different form.

I have left behind
his temple grounds
and have sought to find
another shelter
beyond the peripheries
of his intimate dwelling.

Even so
I am the same old self,
in my own flesh and skin
on the same old skeleton.
My bubbling blood runs
through the same old
arteries and veins.

I have moved
from temple to church,

but how can I ever forget
the lineage in my blood,
the sneer of high caste men,
and the hurt of untouchability
which pecks at my memory
every living moment ?



Mother

I never bothered to
look at you.
Where is the time
for the man crossing the river
to share the grief and happiness
of the water and the boatman?

Years later
when I did look at you
your forehead was the stone idol
of a primordial goddess
pulsating with life
under layers of vermilion.
Your sagging belly
was a rickety nest
abandoned by a bird
after hatching her eggs.
Your feet cracked and split
like parched earth
which has not seen rain.

Lying on your string bed,
coughing and sick,
you are like a mango tree
shaken by storm and wind
giving off its bouquet
of fragrant blossoms.

Your hungry breasts
are like dead rivers

which have changed their course.
You are dragging along
the last days of your life
in the company of medicine bottles.

Dear Mother!
When do I have the time
to explain to you
that I am your life,
and I am also
your hopeful, hesitant death.



The Visitor

Who is the visitor
that comes calling
at the dead of night?

The door carefully closed
with alert locks
rattles wildly.
Could it be a thief?

Maybe he is,
but there is nothing in this room
for him to steal.
My blue conceits
washed clean with soap
lie hidden inside my heart.
My colourful dreams
measuring raindrops
on the ploughshare tip
are strewn on the garbage heap.
My pure miserliness
lies trapped in my lonesome eyelids.

What little lies in the open
is some unkempt dirty shame
flung on my bed.
On the racks are stacked
some programmed words
to fight with my wife.
Before the idol

of the family deity,
smudged with *agarbatti* fumes,
lie some honed complaints.

That is all there is.
Why should there be so much fear
for such trifles?

But at this time of night
who could be the visitor?
What if it is no thief,
but God himself?



We Don't Know

Even though
you don't imagine
the earth collapsing,
there's no harm
in looking at the scenery.

We don't know
who sculpted it;
where the soil came from;
who bought the stones
for the mountains
(on credit, the seller is
still asking for his money).

We know nothing.
We don't know
where the brickbats
come from.
We don't comprehend
when we see
the earth collapsing.

But we see
and know
that a single piece of stone
is enough
to raze to the ground
this formidable earth.



This Crow

This crow
is not that crow.

Since the day it learnt
to suck blood
through its feet,
to hold knives
with its eyes,
and since the day
it found the nectar of solace
disgorged from its larynx,
it is transformed.

It does not sit
on its branch.
It has changed into
white feathers.
In its snow-white robe
it flies and keeps flying.

It is no longer
the same crow .
It is completely transformed.

Those of you
who wait with open mouths
under the dried up tree
hoping for a chewed up bone
dropping by chance,

those of you
who are learning to swim
on the expanse
of the hungry dribble
of future generations,
come back.

Come back
gathering in your arms
all your hopes and dreams.
The crow keeps flying.
It'll keep flying.
The crow is no different
from the two-headed worms
who speak in two voices.

It now seems
that the white feathers
the crow wears
will not be turning black
so soon.



Sadananda Sees the Ocean

You told me things,
but I had got them all wrong.

The waves:
two hungry wings
of a stork
flying over my paddy field.

The sea-shore:
a dusty courtyard,
a neutral count
of vanishing foot prints.

The threshold:
a desolate estuary
of the circle of sound containing
the ploughman's song.

I see,
and realise now,
that I got it wrong.

My name is Sadanand,
and I'm from Na-gaan village.
I've come to Bhubaneswar
to attend the farmers' meet,
where I'll be given
the Governor's medal
for growing the best brinjal.

Perhaps creation
started with the ocean;
the ocean is all
and holds
everything in itself.

Yes,
I'd got it all wrong.
How could we ever
escape drought
when all the water
is destined for the ocean?



Sightseeing

There was no need
to get decked out
to come here.

At least you came.
But what did you
bring with you?

A pair of bangles
grabbing the empty bag
back from the market;
two innocent nubile eyes
seeking a brief meeting;
a demented heir
trying to arrange fire
for the funeral pyre;
and above all,
a *sari* end
tired out after dancing,
and a red washcloth
wet with sweat
after a long session
playing music.

I must say,
one should never
have come here.
Where there is nothing to see
you'll wilt
like a failed lover.

But let me not
dampen your hopes
for that is all you have.

Having come all the way
to this barren site,
look at the singular room.
The stray cow has eaten up
the tiny patch
of intimate grass.

White ants have nibbled away
at the icon on the wall
of the prayer room.

Well,
If you have come here
only to show off
your ability to see,
I have nothing to say.

But then,
whatever made you
come here
decked out so
to look at these trifles?



Golden Jubilee

Gandhi—
a cool oil painting
to brighten up
the living room.

Nehru, Subhash, Patel—
cobwebbed words
handy for naming city streets.

The freedom struggle—
a short-lived hit song
in a cheap Hindi film.

The masses—
a popular band
of well-organised
musicians and dancers.

In the band,
The musician calls the tune
and dismisses the dancer
who moves out of step.

The dancers do not know
how many years
they have been dancing.

Is this the Rainy Season?

The rain bird flits
from branch to branch.
Is this the rainy season?

Early in the morning
when the farmer
takes his plough
to the fields,
the road becomes dusty.
Have you ever seen
a cloud of dust flying
like the dead *sari* end
of a widow?

If you stand firm
against the doorway
and look out
with the relentless eyes
of a falcon,
you'll see
the farmer's ravaged field
smudged in smoke and dust
and his heart
an open wound.

You cannot weep
seeing the smoke of dust
since you have taken
the falcon's strength
in your eyes.

But you'll surely
choose to pray
and scream as you pray:
We need a strain of paddy
which will ripen
only in sunshine,
and not in water.

We don't seek
to go to Mars;
but give us
at a low price
a contraption
to invoke the rains.



Drought

In the pot
hanging from the roof
there are only a handful
of worm-eaten seeds.

Shall I fry and eat them,
or,
sow them in the field?

Let me sow these,
and cover them
with some manure
of my many hopes.

But it's all wasted
in this arid land!
No dreams sprout;
no dreams end.

In the expanse
of the paddy fields
there are only chunks
of dry earth.

Life here is trapped
in the secret exchanges
of sowing and sprouting.



The Building

A vulnerable building.
A beautiful carpet
of sweet losses
spread across the floors.

On the brand new sofa
various needs sit laughing,
sipping bitter cups of tea.

On the verandah outside
flowers of many hues
engaged in mutinous worries.

When the calling bell rings,
they all wake up,
meditating on their
own selfish wishes,
trapped in silent webs.

Who are you, friend,
calling at this hour ?
No one ever has stayed here.
No one is staying now.

Is it so essential
that there needs to be someone
staying in every building?



Haju Tandi

When I ask the earth
for an address,
she points out to me
a strange cremation ground.

When I seek shelter
from the sky,
it shows me
an unscalable height.

Despite my shouting,
a cruel roar
of a dead silence
reigns forever.

Though I have
knocked at many doors
and introduced myself,
I am still treated
like an apparition.

Men,
take note!
My name is Haju Tandi.
I'm on the move
from village to village
carrying with me
my ragged bundle of clothes,
my dented aluminium utensils,

my lame wife,
and our three kids,
looking for work.

I am a common labourer.
Please be kind,
oh gracious one!
Please accept my labour.
I have the strength
in my limbs still
to do any task you give me:
from collecting flowers
for your *puja*,
to cleaning your latrine.



Chelin Bai

When you see Chelin Bai
in the field with a herd of goats
it is hard to figure out
if Bai is tending goats
or the goats are tending her.

If you see her
standing under a tree
covered in her rags,
you might be tempted
to blurt out:
how faithful slaves
the humans are
of their goats!

Bai gives three calls a day.
The first call as she
takes the goats to the field:
'Let the goats out'.
When she brings the goats back
to their owners
her second call:
'Tether your goats'.
And her third call is
when she goes round the village
begging for gruel:
'Give me some rice water'.

In these three calls
the village wakes up thrice,

and as soon the folks go back
to their routine.

The other day
I stopped Bai
in the hot midday sun.
When I tried to talk to her,
she shrunk inside
as if the goats have passed on
all their shame to Bai's hunger.

If I got a chance to ask her
what she gets
by begging for rice water
and tending goats,
braving the unkind weather,
perhaps she would say:
Men too are developed goats;
they know how to eat leaves and grass
picking them, cooking them.
I tend those men!

Ever since I was a child,
I have seen the innocence
of a thousand goats
in Bai's eyes.

Learned men!
Believe me,
it's not easy at all
to describe Bai
in just a single poem.



Banyan Tree and Father

On the riverbank
when I see
a young banyan tree,
I suddenly see my father.

As if waking
early in the morning,
he is rekindling
the dead fire
near the sleeping place
in the paddy fields
and singing to himself
his old favourite song.

Or as if
he is folding his palms
to the sun god
after a dip
in the cold river.

Or, in the field
taking his meal
of moistened rice
after offering
a bit of it
to the memory
of his dead father.

Whenever I sit tired
under the shadow

of this tree,
I suddenly turn
into my early self—
an unruly child
in torn short pants,
father yelling to me:
Go; go to school;
in the night,
I'll take you with me
to sleep in the paddy fields
and show you fireflies.

Whoever asked father
to plant the tree?
The root or the earth
or the river bank?
Who asked him
to sow the seed?

He is buried in the ground
but he has sprouted
in our hearts
and is burgeoning out
with shoots and branches
before our very eyes.

A surge of light breeze
plays on the green leaves
and shakes the tree.
Father rolls his narrow loin cloth
on his head into a turban
and stands on the riverbank
turned into a banyan tree
before our eyes.



Last Scene

The monkey knows
which branch
will break today;
the bird does not.

The butterfly knows
which flower
will blossom today;
the old gardener does not.

But the bird knows
about the eternal dream
cosying up to the branch.
The gardener understands
the intimate fragrance
brooding in the petals.

The wily heart knows
how to steal tear drops
from trusting eyes.
The unseeing eyes do not.

After the tears are gone,
the hidden heart
leaves the forbidden room,
locks in the deceit,
and joins in the boisterous laughter
of the innocent.

Like the monkey
after the branch is broken,
like the butterfly
after savouring the fragrance.



Alone in the Temple

Whether offering incense
or sacred *duba* grass,
there is always a line
not to be crossed.

Here,
One who cannot scream
his heart out
is impotent.
The one
who understands all
but stays quiet
is God.

So much incense,
so much sandal paste
is suffocating.
Heartless priest!
Open the door a little.

God is now breathless
from so much devotion,
shameless, and
steeped in complaints.

He behaves like
the confident householder
who visits the shops
without a copper in his pocket.

Let him go round,
for once,
the sunny areas of our city.
It could not possibly be
pleasant work
to sit all by oneself
in silence, for aeons,
even inside a temple.



Morning-after Greeting

Who can trust
this beggarly life,
dear friend!

Drought today,
flood tomorrow.
Some rice gruel today,
nothing the next.

So, come!
Let's embrace.
Who knows
where we'll be
this day next year
to greet each other
the morning after
the new year ?

Will it be
under the mahul tree
in the cremation ground,
in the same old clothes
we wear today?

Maybe, dear friend,
now is going to be
the only happy moment
in all our memory.
So, come,

let's greet each other
and exchange a few words,
now that we have been able
to scrape through life
at least thus far.



Body Purification

If you can, but once,
fix a bone in your tongue,
stand firm on the ground
and ask yourself:
Which Ganges can clean
my shit-smeared body?
How many stacks
of tulsi leaves
to sanctify me?
How many tons of sandalpaste
to deodorize my body?

How do I look
when I clean your sewer tank
taking out bucket loads
of faeces floating
on the water used
to clean your bottoms?

How do I look
when I swim breathless
in the water flowing
straight out of your latrines
to clean the sewer depths ?

What do I look like when I pick up
the maggot infested mangy dog
to clean the street
so that your car

can have a smooth drive ?
Once,
just one time,
guide the pupils of your eyes
towards the sun
and look at me,
and then only can you measure
the strength you have
within you.

Wherever I am
reeks of bad odour.
Your nose curls;
your mouth retches;
your eyes squirm.
But when I'm sick for a day,
your streets stay unswept;
the latrines choke;
hospitals groan
as patients go on a rampage.

Ask your grey cells
just once to explain
what Smriti, Purana,
Intelligence, Education mean.
I'm the one who handles shit
and eats his rice
with the same fingers;
and I'm the one
who knows the difference
between shit and rice.

Yet, I don't know
what Smriti, Purana,
Intelligence and Education are.

I've seen it all –
worms excreted from your innards,
snot and drivel
expelled from your mouth,
blood congealing
on your deathbed.

You may scoff and sneer at me,
but when I'm not around,
I know you have
a mental breakdown.

Fix a bone in your tongue
and tell me for once –
how much Ganges, tulsi
and sandal are needed
to purify and sanctify
my shit-smeared body.



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